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PUBLIC RELATIONS SUPPORT FOR A PRIVATE-PUBLIC DIALOG

KOSOVO CLUSTER AND BUSINESS SUPPORT PROJECT



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PUBLIC RELATIONS SUPPORT FOR A PRIVATE-PUBLIC DIALOG

THE PRIVATE-PUBLIC DIALOG WAS A NOVEL PROCESS FOR KOSOVO. IT INVOLVED MANY ORGANIZATIONS WITH DIFFERENT AGENDA AND DIFFERENT PATTERNS OF OPERATION AND COMMUNICATION. MEETINGS OF TASK GROUPS BROUGHT AROUND THE SAME TABLE INDIVIDUALS WHOSE EXPERIENCES IN ENTERING AND DEVELOPING A DIALOG AND WHOSE DEGREES OF FLEXIBILITY AND WILLINGNESS FOR DIALOG VARIED GREATLY IN THE BEGINNING. DEALING WITH THIS REALITY REQUIRED MUCH FLEXIBILITY AND GENERATED A NEED TO CONSTANTLY ADJUST ALL PLANS TO THE VERY DYNAMIC EVOLUTION OF THE PROCESS, AND COMMUNICATE THESE ADJUSTMENTS TO THE PARTICIPANTS.

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PURPOSE OF ASSIGNMENT

The USAID Mission in Kosovo has regarded the private-public dialog (PPD) as a very important activity undertaken by the Kosovo Cluster and Business Support (KCBS) as its process goal (as opposed to program goal) is to have the private sector take ownership of the problems around it. Broad public awareness of Dialog activities, discussions and outcomes are, therefore, an important part of the success of this endeavor. As the task groups' recommendations were expected to generate intense debate among influential stakeholders, in order to guide this debate toward a positive outcome and build momentum for change in Kosovo's highly charged atmosphere, KCBS decided to hire a short-term public relations advisor to develop a campaign to support the change process.

BACKGROUND

As part of its mission, KCBS is committed to creating a public-private dialog to shift the relationship between the two sectors from one of public confrontation and opposition, coupled with personal contacts behind the scenes, to a more transparent give-and-take in which facts, not contacts, drive decisions.

The most visible manifestation of this strategy was the Lake Ohrid Conference, where leaders of public, private, and NGO organizations, including the donor community, gathered to explore potential futures for Kosovo. The primary outcome was the creation of six task groups to determine the roles of the public and private sectors in development strategies and identify, examine, and recommend private- public partnerships to achieve those strategies.

The six task groups, which have focused on Education, Financial Stability, Quality Standards, Infrastructure, Tax Implementation and Transparency included representatives of the private sector (business associations, professional associations and individual businesses), public sector (ministries, government agencies, assembly), think tanks, non-profit organizations, donors and international organizations. The groups were due to generate recommendations within 100 days of their first meetings, i.e. by November 30, 2005.

Recommendations were to be reviewed in a public conference, initially scheduled for December 2nd, 2005. The purpose of the conference was also to ensure wide publicity to the outcomes of the process, expected to be considered for implementation by the participants in the dialog – primarily by the representatives of the government and of the private sector.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report refers to the initial findings of the assignment, enlists the main activities undertaken by the advisor in connection to the private-public dialog, highlights the outcome of the assignment of a short-term communication advisor to the process and presents suggestions for next steps.

The dialog is a novel process for Kosovo. It has involved many organizations with different agendas and different patterns of operation and communication. The meetings of the task groups brought around the same table individuals whose experiences in entering and developing a dialog and whose degrees of flexibility and willingness for dialog varied greatly in the beginning. Dealing with this reality, both in terms of facilitating the meetings and handling communication required a large dose of flexibility and generated a need to constantly adjust all plans to the very dynamic evolution of the process.

Therefore, a lot of the work done in this assignment consisted in detailed preparation of meetings that could have a significant impact on the progress of the dialog, rather than in explicit communication activities. Significant effort was also invested in other areas, such as managing expectations of various partners which did not always converge and in building coalitions in support of potential outcomes that could benefit the whole process.

Such efforts fall largely under the umbrella of “communication to stakeholders”: it turned out to be the backbone of this assignment. Particular attention was given to circulating information among members of the business associations, as local partners did not always have the means or the resources to do it.

This report recommends to the KCBS hand over the next steps of the dialog to local partners and to adjust the specific communication activities to the level of commitment demonstrated by the key stakeholders – the government and the business associations – towards the implementation of the recommendations formulated by the task groups.

FIELD ACTIVITIES TO ACHIEVE PURPOSES

The first few days of the assignment were spent on extensive reading of the background materials relevant to the development of the dialog, on conducting comprehensive interviews with the KCBS staff who had been actively involved in the process and on attending several task groups meetings. Interviews with some of the Chairs of the task groups and a visit to the Finance Fair were also part of an early documentation stage, which generated a few initial findings that were used as working assumptions, such as:

- The private-public dialog is brand new to Kosovo, as it is based on a philosophy an approach that is not typical either for Kosovo, or for the Balkans. There is no similar experience that can be used in setting benchmarks to assess progress and to evaluate outcomes. The value resides primarily in building a strong sense of participation and in forging agreement among representatives of the private and public sector. Both require time, patience and flexibility;
- At the start of my assignment (beginning of November) knowledge of the private-public dialog was limited to the participants in the task groups. The assumption that participants widely and promptly circulated information about debates among the members of the business associations and among government institutions was to be carefully checked, in order to make sure that the main stakeholders are accurately informed about the dialog and that they accept its outcome;
- Given the dynamic, sometimes unpredictable evolution of the dialog, an early exposure of the process to the media could be detrimental. Pressured by the need to produce sensationalistic stories, the journalists would not take the time necessary to understand the way the process evolved, but would be rather tempted to present any glitches in a controversial manner that could have a highly negative impact;

Another conclusion which emerged with clarity later in the assignment was that the dialog should be viewed – and consequently promoted - as a process, which may and should continue after the task groups formulated their proposals, rather than as a project whose final goal was to produce lists of commendations. To achieve this end, the Dialog needed to have its own identity independent of USAID, KCBS, and the partner organizations. Therefore, branding the Private-Public Dialog was added to my initial deliverables.

A. In terms of communication, the focus of the first week of the assignment was preparing basic information materials regarding the private-public dialog and identifying effective channels for distribution, primarily among stakeholders.

Within a few days, two background documents – fact sheet and a list of questions and answers (Q & A) regarding the private-public dialog – were drafted and circulated among KCBS staff familiar with the process.

Given the very successful outcome of the Finance Fair, a KCBS initiative, I suggested and drafted a press release, which referred to the event as an illustration of the need for the private sector to take ownership of issues relevant for the business climate in Kosovo. The press release was meant to generate public awareness about the private-public dialog.

In discussions with the representatives of one of the main local partners in the process, the Kosovo Chamber of Commerce (KCC), I obtained their support and co-operation in the distribution of information materials. They offered to distribute hard copies of the fact sheet and Q & A to the upcoming general assembly, to include stories on the PPD in their monthly newsletter “Informatori” and to post information about the dialog, including meeting minutes, research papers created for the PPD, and task groups’ final recommendations, on their website.

I drafted and circulated among the PPD team a questionnaire meant to provide the KCBS with an indication as to how participants assessed the usefulness of the dialog and how interested they were in continuing the process after November 30th, when the task groups were supposed to present a list of recommendations. The questionnaire also served the purpose of collecting material (statements, opinions, assessments) that could be used in designing further information materials.

B. Finalizing the background information materials, initiating distribution and creating a visual identity for the PPD were the highlights of the second week.

The fact sheet and the Q & A were completed and the agreement of the outgoing President of the KCC was secured for distributing them at the general assembly of the KCC. The information materials went out under the logos of the local partners – the Alliance of Kosovar Businesses (AKB), the Kosovo Bankers Association (KBA) and the KCC - to illustrate and emphasize local ownership of the process. I explored the possibility to ensure distribution of information materials by other local partners than the KCC, and held a separate meeting with the AKB leadership on this matter. It turned out that the Alliance does not have either a web site or an internal newsletter that could serve communication purposes for the PPD.

While the information materials went out initially under the logos of the local partners, we contracted a local advertising agency to design a logo for the private-public dialog.

The press release on the Finance Fair was sent to the local media, and a couple of leading newspapers published it.

Further consultation with stakeholders – by means of participating in a few final task groups meetings, interviewing Chairs and discussing with USAID staff who were overseeing the process – was also part of the agenda of the second week. As some of the task groups held final meetings, the questionnaire was distributed among participants.

C. Educating the media on the nature of the PPD and refining the concept of the event that was to conclude the activity of the task groups were the main goals of the third week.

As the background information materials had already entered the public domain, I asked Puhie Demaku, the KCBS Communication Specialist, to run informal meetings with media. The purpose of these meetings was two-fold: to brief journalists about the PPD and to assess the potential coverage they would give to the process. The journalists indicated that they would evaluate the success of the dialog by looking at its tangible outcomes and expressed a rather skeptical attitude regarding the willingness of the government to implement any of the recommendations that were to be generated by the task groups. PPD staff received a similar reaction at a briefing of association executives held at the same time.

This finding corroborated with concerns expressed by the USAID staff regarding the potential outcome of the public conference scheduled to conclude the activity of the task groups. Therefore, the concept of the final event was reviewed and changed from high profile joint working session to a low profile, “closed door” technical event. Once this agreement on the nature of the event was reached, the content of the communication advice and of the specific communication activities were also reviewed.

The background information materials were revised to reflect the new approach and to further emphasize the local ownership of the dialog. However, topical activities such as conducting phone interviews with participants, final task groups meetings and preparing further distribution of information materials among members of the business and professional associations continued unabated. I have also participated in the drafting of the recommendations formulated by the task groups.

D. Wide dissemination of the task groups' recommendations and intense preparation for the joint working session were the focus of the fourth week.

Perhaps one of the most important aspects of my assignment in the long run was creating a unique identity for the Private-Public Dialog independent of the USAID project that created it. The first step in this process was to create a visual identity in the form of a logo. The PPD logo was finalized by the advertising agency. The design of the logo was an inclusive process involving several rounds of consultations with stakeholders (heads of business associations, task group Chairs, KCBS and USAID staff) who functioned as "ad hoc" focus groups.

I initiated the procurement of promotional items for the joint working session, which was eventually scheduled for December 12th. In order to ensure graphic consistency and given the very limited time available for this operation, we contracted the same advertising agency that created the logo to design and produce a banner, posters and folders.

Further distribution of information on PPD was done in co-operation with the Society of Certified Accountants and Auditors in Kosovo (SCAAK). They agreed to insert a background note on the dialog in the edition of the newsletter of SCAAK that was distributed to an audience that includes society members, business executives, government and assembly officials.

We reached an internal agreement on the menu and content of the PPD web page, which the KCC agreed to host. The agenda of the joint working session was agreed in a meeting with the Chairs.

After a meticulous review of the minutes of the task groups' meetings, the recommendations formulated by each group were prepared and sent out, together with the basic information materials. I participated in the process by drafting the cover letter, which joined the recommendations, in behalf of the task groups' Chairs.

As part of the preparation for the working session I participated in a meeting at the Co-ordination Office of the Prime Minister's Office, which resulted in the government accepting to co-sponsor the joint working session, together with the AKB and KCC.

E. Working to secure a tangible outcome of the joint working session and outlining options for a communication plan were the main items on the agenda of the last week.

During the last few days of the assignment I focused on the outcome and the visual identity of the working session. For the latter, I kept in close contact with the advertising agency on the design and production of the promotional items for the working session: banner, posters, folders, and on the layout of the venue. Upon the request of the PPD co-coordinator and in consultation with Puhie Demaku I procured the services of a professional photographer who was contracted to take pictures at the working session.

An effort was made in helping the management of the business association ANADRINI distribute hard copies of recommendations and information materials among its members.

I suggested to the main sponsors of the working session – the AKB, the KCC and the Office of the Prime Minister – that they agree on a draft public statement in support of the private-public dialog and to submit it to the consideration of participants as a potential outcome of the event. Upon their agreement I drafted the statement, which was included in the folders together with the draft recommendations and information materials.

Upon consultations with task groups' Chairs, I prepared a Power Point template for the individual task group presentations they were expected to do in the working session. This common graphic structure would help those unfamiliar with all of the groups' work to more easily identify similarities and differences across the groups' deliberations and recommendations.

I discussed again with KCC representatives about the final shape and location of the PPD web page and delivered materials for posting. I prepared an outline for a possible communication plan after the working session, together with formats for a background note to the media, a press release and a summary for a tentative special edition of the KCC monthly newsletter, "Informatori", dedicated entirely to the PPD. Finally, I indicated to the KCBS staff that I will make myself available for further consultation on the issue of the communication plan.

Key to the outline is the suggestion to adjust further communication activities to the nature of the outcome of the working session against, such that the more tangible the results of the session (in terms of specific commitments towards implementing recommendations), the more communication activities to develop. Equally important, further communication activities should be undertaken by the local partners in the dialog, while the KCBS would retain a mere advisory role.

TASK FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Here is a summary of what I regard as tangible outcomes of my activity:

- Created the basic information materials necessary to describe the process and communicate it to stakeholders and to the public (fact sheet, Q & A, web page, background note for SCAAK magazine);
- Increased awareness regarding the dialog among members of business and professional associations represented in the task groups by distributing hard copies of the information materials at the KCC general assembly and among members of the ANADRINI association and by inserting a background note in the SCAAK magazine;
- Made the private-public dialog process visible to a larger audience by posting the information materials on the web site of the KCC;
- Provided the PPD with a visual identity by creating the logo and by producing promotional items for the working session that were consistent with the logo;
- Consolidated acceptance of recommendations by participants in the task groups, by advising and working together with the KCBS staff in preparing meetings with key stakeholders – main business associations, Office of the Prime Minister;
- Ensured a positive outcome of the working session by persuading the Co-ordination Office of the Prime Minister, the AKB and the KCC to jointly sponsor a public statement in favor of the dialog, which I eventually drafted;
- Helped KCBS staff, task groups Chairs and in building a common view on what was to be defined as tangible, positive outcome of the dialog.

In addition to the above, I obtained the agreement of most business associations to undersign a cover letter that could be addressed to the government and assembly as a lobbying tool in support of recommendations. Should there be a need to resort to such a lobbying effort for ensuring that (at least some) recommendations will be implemented, the KCBS staff can advise the local business associations – primarily the KCC and the AKB – to use it.

I have to add a personal note here: while the items enlisted above indicate the focus of my work and summarize my personal view on what I accomplished in this assignment, I must emphasize that the smooth wrapping up of the task groups, the good preparation of the joint working session and its successful outcome are indeed the result of a very substantial team effort, where co-operation and mutual support prevailed. The achievements that I highlighted in the summary were made possible by the personal qualification and dedication of the KCBS staff with whom I worked closely in this assignment, and facilitated by a friendly and supportive professional environment.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE ACTIVITY

The next steps to be taken in the future development of the PPD, and on the communication front depend largely upon the outcome of the working session.

Communication activities may range from issuing a short press release (in case of a poor outcome) to (in case of a good, tangible outcome) a list of activities that include:

- issuing the press release;
- organizing a press briefing / press conference;
- organizing interviews with daily newspapers and participation in TV talk shows;
- publishing a special edition of "Informatori", the KCC monthly newsletter;
- publishing stories in magazines such as the ones printed by UNMIK, EUMIK, OSCE;

It is important to emphasize again that the local partners – mainly the AKB and KCC – should take the lead in communication efforts, while the KCBS would advise on the content, prepare drafts upon request and insist on consistency of messages.

The same approach applies to any future form of dialog that participants see fit and agree upon: it should be championed by local partners, who should take responsibility not only for the content of the debates, but also for preparation of events, agendas etc. To the extent possible, given limited resources, the KCBS may provide advice and some training.

The facilitation role that the KCBS retained throughout the process required a substantial amount of work, which probably exceeded by far the initial estimates. The final stage of the activity of the task groups added increased demands upon an already very small team, which had to cope with a multitude of tasks. For obvious strategic reasons –such as the need for local representatives of the private and public sector to develop patterns of co-operation in addressing and solving issues that pertain to economic development in Kosovo – and by virtue of the limited resources that the KCBS can further invest in the PPD, handing over the continuation of the dialog to local partners is the way to move ahead. Judging by the individual capacity of the local partners – in terms of staff, premises, equipment - the KCC appears as the first choice for taking the lead role. However, partners that currently have lesser organizational capacity – such as the AKB – should also participate.